



Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS

User Capacity

In the past, the question of how much public use is appropriate in a national park has been framed in terms of what is known as the visitor “carrying capacity.” The concept originated in the 1930s as a way to measure the amount of livestock grazing possible within a given area of land. This was expressed as a set number of animals that the land could support.



In contrast, when the focus is on preserving the integrity of whole ecological systems and providing visitor enjoyment and education—as is the case in national parks—the situation is more complex. In national parks, capacity is determined by what types and levels of visitor use can be accommodated while maintaining social and resource conditions consistent with the purposes of the park and the goals of its mission.



The National Park Service in particular has a mission that clearly calls for the preservation of park resources and for the public enjoyment of these resources in a manner which leaves them “unimpaired for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations.” Similarly, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act Section 10 (a) calls for protection and enhancement of river values without limiting other uses to the extent that such uses do not adversely impact the values for which the river was designated.

The Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS will present a range of alternatives that address the carrying capacity concept—which it refers to as *user capacity*.

How does the park manage use in Yosemite?

The user capacity alternatives presented in the Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS will be just one component in a larger program for managing use in the Merced River corridor.

From the permit system in wilderness to traffic control measures in Yosemite Valley, managing use in Yosemite is central to the operation of the park. For decades, park managers in Yosemite have relied on a network of mechanisms and methods to help protect park resources—and the experience of visitors—while allowing for visitor use.

This greater user capacity management program takes into consideration not just the use and experience of visitors, but all park users, including employees, residents, and American Indian groups.

The user capacity alternatives presented in the Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS would function in addition to the other user capacity methods currently at work in the park. Thus, the alternative presented in the plan are just one component in a larger program for managing use in the Merced River corridor.

What will be added to the user capacity program through the revised plan?

The range of alternatives presented in the Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS will consider VERP along with other user capacity methods to fulfill the requirements of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

In keeping with the direction of the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, the Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS will build on the foundation established in the Merced River Plan/FEIS with a user capacity program that is consistent with the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and Secretarial Guidelines.

The approach outlined in the original 2000 Merced River Plan addresses visitor use within the Merced River corridor through adoption of a Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) program. (VERP is the National Park Service's standard approach to addressing user capacity.) Within the VERP framework, user capacity is defined as: "The type and level of visitor use that can be accommodated while sustaining the desired resource and social conditions that complement the purposes of the park."

VERP establishes desired conditions (identified as management zones in the Merced River Plan) for both the quality of resources and the visitor experience. Based on these desired conditions, VERP identifies the types of visitor use that are appropriate, with particular focus on the protection of the Merced River's Outstandingly Remarkable Values. Standards and indicators are then developed, which are part of an ongoing monitoring program that measures impacts relating to visitor use. Should a standard be exceeded, management action would be triggered to correct or prevent degradation.

However, the 2000 Merced River Plan presented only examples of standards and indicators and committed to fully implementing VERP within five years. The Court's opinion stated that this "fail[ed] to yield any actual measure of user capacities, whether by setting limits on the specific number of visitors, by monitoring and maintaining environmental and experiential criteria under the VERP framework, or through some other method." The Court affirmed that VERP may be used "to fulfill the user capacities requirement. However the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act does require that the VERP be implemented through the adoption of quantitative measures sufficient to ensure its effectiveness as a current measure of user capacities."

The range of alternatives presented in the Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS will consider VERP along with other user capacity methods to fulfill the requirements of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and adopt what the Court defined as "specific measurable limits on use."

For more information

- See the Revised Merced River Plan/SEIS fact sheet (available on the park's web site at www.nps.gov/yose/planning).
- See the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) fact sheet (available on the parks web site at www.nps.gov/yose/planning).
- Read the February 2004 *User Capacity Program for the Merced Wild and Scenic River Corridor* (also available on the park's web site).
- Attend a National Park Service open house, usually held monthly in Yosemite Valley.
- Review the *Draft Merced Wild and Scenic River Revised Comprehensive Management Plan/Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement* when it is available in January 2005.